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Energy's answer is blowing in the wind

 By Brent Israelsen
 The Salt Lake Tribune

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- In eastern New Mexico, 136 giant propellers whirl incessantly in the steady winds that blow from the southwest.

The three-bladed props are attached to turbines atop 213-foot-high towers lined up along a 22-mile stretch of the Taiban Mesa, a largely barren, high-desert plain populated mostly by antelope and an occasional bovine.

Called the New Mexico Wind Energy Center, the turbines churn out up to 200 megawatts of pollution-free electricity.

The center, operational since October, has become the poster child for an effort by New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson to turn the Land of Enchantment into the land of renewable energy.

But as New Mexico basks in the national limelight of clean-energy development, Utah officials are defending their state's contributions to the green-power craze.

"I would put Utah's performance in renewable energy up against anybody's," said Jeff Burks, policy expert for the Utah Energy Office. "No state in the interior West can hold a candle to what Utah is doing in energy efficiency."

Richardson played host last week to the Western Governors Association's first-ever North American Energy Summit.

He used the occasion to announce a Westwide challenge, endorsed by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, to boost renewable energy production to 10 percent of consumption by 2015 and to improve energy efficiency by 20 percent by 2020.

Richardson called for a "new energy economy" that would be led by the West, which is rich in wind and solar potential. "I want our state to be one of the nation's leading suppliers of clean energy -- wind, solar, biomass and zero-emission coal," he says.

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To underscore his goal, the governor announced the formation of a new solar-energy task force and the creation of a clean-energy development council.

Those announcements come a month after Richardson urged state lawmakers to pass a package of clean-energy tax incentives and mandates. Chief among the mandates was a "renewable portfolio standard."

New Mexico's standard requires that utilities derive at least 10 percent of their electricity from wind, solar, geothermal or biomass sources by 2011.

This flurry of activity has Utah environmentalists looking longingly at their kitty-corner neighbor.

"We here in Utah aspire to reach the level of success in New Mexico," said Sarah Wright, director of the Utah Clean Energy Alliance.

Utah gets less than 1 percent of its energy from renewable sources. Only 12 states have renewable portfolio standards; half a dozen more, including Colorado, are considering measures.

The Utah Legislature rejected the idea of the renewable energy standards, earning the state an "F" on a renewable energy report card issued by the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The grade irks Burks.

Utah, he said, has incentives, both regulatory and legislative, that are encouraging clean energy and efficiency investments.

For example, lawmakers just passed a sales tax break this year for renewable energy equipment. That joins the existing income-tax credit for wind turbines.

The state also has persuaded major utilities, such as PacifiCorp and the Utah Associated Municipal Power Systems, to commit to renewable energy.

Pacificorp, for example, is seeking renewable energy sources that could boost its green portfolio to 12 percent by 2015. The power company also is spending \$20 million, compared to \$2 million a few years ago, on energy efficiency programs among its customers.

Burks said Utah's clean-energy image suffers because no large wind farms are within the state's boundaries.

But Utah energy consumers, through their rates, are helping to finance projects in surrounding states.

"We're holding our breath to see what will come out of PacifiCorp [plan]," Burks said. "We're hopeful a Utah wind farm will come out of that."

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